

BACKGROUND BRIEFING: A VIEW OF AFRICAN NATIONALISM

1. INTRODUCTION

It is only natural that assessments of political movements like African nationalism will vary according to the perspective of the observer who will tend to consider nationalist leaders either as power-hungry elitists or as self-sacrificing idealists burning to "liberate" an oppressed people. While it is undeniable that parallels exist between nationalism as it swept through Europe in the nineteenth century and the "winds of change" in formerly colonial Africa, there is a tendency for sophisticated analysts to seek to explain events in, Africa in terms of conflicting economic policies, ideological commitments or even the thesis - antithesis-synthesis of dialectical materialism. They are thus tempted to invent interpretations unlikely to be comprehended by the protagonists themselves: to give but one example, the fall of General Gowon in Nigeria in July 1975, was the cause of puzzlement to many British journalists unable to see the simple truth that General Mohammed took a golden opportunity for entirely personal reasons. Since we are here concerned with definitions, moreover, what sort of "nationalism" is it that proclaims itself so firmly committed to international bodies like the Organisation for African Unity, the "non-aligned" bloc and the United Nations? Rather than seeking, therefore, to compare African nationalism with European nationalism, it may be more appropriate to draw a parallel with, say, Algerian nationalism in the twentieth century. As Major Edgar O'Ballance writes in his book "The Algerian Insurrection, 1954-1962" (Faber, London, 1967) -

"In the case of Algeria, the ideal or driving force was that of nationalism, but that had to be discovered, polished up and then forced upon the people, who knew nothing of it. Only with difficulty had this country of diverse people and tribes been pacified by the French and it had never thought of itself as a unified nation with a distinct soul of its own. Ferhat Abbas - "founder" of Algerian nationalism - has told of how, as a young man, he searched fruitlessly for the "Algerian nation", and came to the conclusion it had no historical basis. In short, one had to be produced to order by the revolutionaries".

Like Algeria, "Zimbabwe" could not be said to have existed as a nation before the arrival of the whites, for, as any student of Rhodesian history knows, the established pattern was of successive tribal migration and hegemonies, such as the Matabele monarchy, and not of a cultural and social uniformity confined within defined territorial limits. The concept of "citizens of Zimbabwe" is thus largely the creation of modern black intellectuals, whose cultural vision resembles the historical reality only to the same degree as the colourful "National dress" of some independent African states represents an authentic version of the original aboriginal loin-cloth. In the case of "Zimbabwe", the symbolic value of these impressive ruins lies not only in the belief that they were built without any foreign, - especially white - inspiration but also in the myth of a "golden age", so dear to the psyche of any nationalist.

2. EMOTIONALISM

Nationalism, whether European or African, depends upon the rejection of the present in favour of a romantic past and an even more romantic future. It also needs a real or

imagine enemy, responsible for "things as they are". Throughout the "Third World" therefore, there has been strong anti-colonial feeling even in countries like Thailand which have never known foreign administration, for the good reason that nationalism has only been able to unify the people against "imperialism" and not in favour of social cooperation per se. The emotional need to find an "enemy" is naturally skilfully directed by the Communists against the former colonial powers, who have relinquished political control of areas which continue to provide the essential raw materials for industrialized economic structures. Often, hatred of the "colonialists" completely sweeps aside any concern with reality: for instance, the demands by African nationalists at the Geneva Conference that the Rhodesian Prime Minister only be allowed to participate as a member of the British delegation and the constant calls for "decolonisation" in what is in effect not a "colonial" situation, are completely irrational, but satisfy the delegates emotionally. In the case of South Africa particularly, where the rights of occupancy of the white minority are as well established as those of the white majority in the United States, the passionate calls for "decolonisation" continue despite the fact that no colonial authority whatsoever is involved.

3. RACISM

The emotional vehemence of "anti-colonialism" leads one to suspect, moreover, that a driving force behind African nationalism is overt or covert racism. While the desire for self-determination and economic equality is both natural and in the interest of society as a whole, there is also a desire to humiliate the white man or to expel him from Africa on the grounds, not that his privileges are not earned, but that he is of different ethnic and cultural origin. Those humanitarians in the West who are so ready to believe statements by African nationalists that they oppose racism are prone to overlook less-well publicised statements to the contrary. To take a well-known "moderate", for instance, Joshua Nkomo told a German journalist, Hans Germani, that "Amin is a great man, what he did to the Asians was right", while the "idealistic" Julius Nyerere told white farmers in Tanzania that there was no future for the white man under African socialism. Most black nationalists, in fact, have well grasped the need_ to be "non-racial for external consumption -particularly in order to obtain funds from, idealists - while fomenting anti-white or Asian feeling, and hence support, at home..."

4. INFERIORITY COMPLEX

Unlike European nationalism, moreover, African nationalism shows unmistakeable signs of the classic cultural inferiority complex common to all the "developing nations", obliged in spite of themselves and in-spite of what Frantz Fanon has analysed as the reaction against "colonialist" technology, to follow western leadership in many fields. In Africa, where many tribes in remote areas are still living in the late Iron Age, resentments and hypersensitivities vis-a-vis the advanced nations are particularly acute, hence the virulent anti-Western and especially anti-American rhetoric at the United Nations. When a Western spokesman, such as Daniel P. Moynihan, erstwhile American ambassador to the UN, dares to rebut these denunciations the emotions of the "Third World" delegates verge on paroxysm. This extreme touchiness naturally becomes dangerous when

associated with absolute power. Joshua Nkomo has stated, for instance, that "There is no primitive Rhodesian African", choosing to ignore the fact that liberal democracy among the illiterate Batonka, for example is not considered a viable proposition by the best-intentioned of anthropologists. In all black-ruled states, moreover, racial and tribal minorities are under constant scrutiny for any sign of "arrogance", "disrespect and disloyalty". The incessant demands for "human dignity", in itself a highly questionable philosophical - concept, thus arise from a psychological craving that is not assuaged by success in reaching the apparent goal, that of political power. It seems likely, moreover, that the constant calls for unity and "solidarity", between the "brothers" and "sisters" reflects not only the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement in the US, but also a deep-seated mutual distrust. One suspects that "decolonisation", which has been so easily obtained in most of Africa would have been more satisfying had it taken place in more dramatic circumstances. The behaviour of the Mugabe faction at the Geneva Conference would suggest that "Armageddon" exerts greater appeal than any peaceful transfer of power through negotiations.

5. MODERATION

It is vital to emphasise the difference between a European and an African approach to "moderation". Joshua Nkomo, generally portrayed as "reasonable" and "moderate", gave a highly-revealing interview to the magazine, "Jeune Afrique", (June 1976) as follows:

"Jeune Afrique": The Western Press speaks of you as a "moderate". Do you see yourself as such?

Joshua Nkomo: The Western Press, like Western Governments, has lost track of events. They always back the wrong horse and I am afraid they are mistaken.

The contrast between Mr Nkomo's view of himself and his image in the Western newspapers results in part from the obvious truth that the connotations of the word "moderate" in the Western political tradition include "wisdom", "humanity", "rationality", etc., whereas the African associates the idea with "Uncle Toms", "sell-outs", "lackeys of imperialism", and so forth. As already pointed out, black nationalists would forfeit much Western financial and moral support were they to display racism or a taste for violence to the outside world, but would weaken their own position domestically by doing otherwise. It is an uncontested historical fact that Mr Nkomo, having reneged on his commitment to the 1961 Constitution, organised a massive campaign of urban violence and intimidation in the early 1960s, with inflammatory calls to drive the whites out coupled with terrorism against any non-political or non-violent black. Curiously enough, there is a deep-seated reluctance in the Western world to take these pronouncements - if published - seriously despite the fact that Idi Amin, Samora Machel and others have done, exactly what they have said they would do.

To discuss "extreme" African nationalist declarations as "playing to the gallery", is to ignore the history of the continent since the ending of the colonial era. One may note in passing, moreover, a parallel with the strange surprise that the Communist powers usually achieve in pursuing the well-known Leninist strategy in Africa: the Soviet-Cuban intervention in Angola, which produced such a shock in the Western world, was perfectly consistent not only with Lenin's directives, but also with Brezhnev's pronouncements on the purpose of "detente". There are no grounds, therefore, for the comfortable assumption that African nationalists, like Mr Nkomo and his rivals, will not put their policies into practice.

6. COMMUNIST INFLUENCE

The extent of Communist influence on African nationalism is a controversial issue. It is possible to hold that nationalism merely enlists the aid of the Communist powers to throw off the colonialist yoke of capitalism or to believe that nationalism because of economic incompetence and social romanticism will inevitably lead to a "people's democracy", hence to "socialism" and ultimately to "Socialist or proletarian dictatorship". There can be no doubt, however, that Communist agents have been instrumental in nurturing infant nationalist movements, despite their fundamental philosophical incompatibility.

Communist support for Frelimo over the years resulting in a Marxist Mocambique is a classic example.

So much of the Western industrialised countries strength derives from guaranteed supplies of raw materials that nationalism in the "Third World" must be advantageous to the planners of world revolution who have been able to marshall the "non-aligned" forces so effectively against the West, in the oil crisis for instance. And the collapse of Portuguese colonialism, the weakest of European domination structures in Africa, has led to the creation of openly Communist systems in Angola and Mocambique, to join to "advanced socialist" societies like Tanzania, People's Congo and Guinea. Here again, it would be folly to discount Marxist statements by African nationalists as mere "posturing".

7. BLACK DICTATORSHIP

In his penetrating analyses of social development in Communist countries, the Yugoslav political philosopher, Milovan Djilas has drawn attention to the formation of a "new class", comprising leading Party officials, with their families and friends, who use the formidable apparatus of a one-party state to maintain their privileged positions. Much the same principle applies in black-ruled Africa: virtually all countries are now controlled by one-party hierarchies or military dictatorships, the "Independence Constitutions" having been either ignored or formally abolished.

It was understandable for idealists to hope for liberal democracy to prevail in Africa two decades ago: today there should be very few of these idealists left. The black "new class", in which corruption, nepotism and despotism are incarnated, has generally shown itself to be little concerned by the welfare of the ordinary blacks, whose lot in many cases has deteriorated since the advent of nationalist rule. The preoccupation of many African leaders seem to be personal enrichment and the elimination of potential rivals.

A revealing incident recently occurred at the Geneva Conference on Rhodesia, when Bishop Muzorewa proposed that the First Minister of the interim government should be elected on the basis of "one-man-one-vote". This was promptly denounced by the "Patriotic Front" of Nkomo and Mugabe, who do not enjoy the same popularity, and feared for their personal positions if "democracy" were to be seen to work. One nationalist extremist, Mr Austin Chakaodza, the ZANU representative in London, was no doubt perfectly frank when he stated: "In the new Zimbabwe, there will be no parliamentary democracy, no voting and no canvassing. This is necessary if we are to consolidate our newly-found independence. Later, elections may be possible". One may

legitimately question, therefore, whether African nationalism is really concerned with "government for the people by the people".

8. CONCLUSION

It is now possible to formulate an adequate definition of African nationalism thus: "A mass movement drawing on racial hostility to replace an advanced leading group of a different ethnic origin by a "new class" of privileged despots of the same ethnic origin as the masses in the name of democracy, human rights and so forth". This definition is unlikely to please those Western opinion-formers who compensate for a guilt complex over colonialism and slavery (the Arabs, who have the worst record of all in this respect, being non-white and wealthy, have escaped all odium) by a determination to think the best of the "oppressed masses". Nevertheless, such sentimentalism is quite foreign to the African nationalists themselves, whose frankness should never be taken as idle rhetoric. To do otherwise is to do the ordinary blacks in Africa the gravest disservice, and nullify all genuine concern for their peaceful progress in the political, economic and social spheres.

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